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Article abstract

Northern Alberta is a space of conflict, not only in terms of environmental politics, but likewise in terms of regional identity and community sustainability. Using a variety of forms of narrative (drawing from mediated and unmediated sources in image, text, and sound), we can reveal the dominant cultural imaginaries that frame and limit our abilities to progress beyond these conflicts. This is a study of regionalism, nationalism, and identity in a city divided between an imagined Albertan conservatism, a displaced Newfoundland outport, and a cosmopolitan global work-force. It is a study of narrative in everyday life, in an effort to deconstruct divisive attitudes in acknowledgement of a more complex and diverse reality.

MEXICANS WITH SWEATERS, WORKING IN THE OIL/TAR SANDS, IN NEWFOUNDLAND'S THIRD LARGEST CITY

Regionalism, Narrative, and Imagination in Fort McMurray, (Texas?)

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Introduction: Erasing Dichotomies through Critical Regionalism

Region and *regionalism* are ill-defined yet popularly used concepts that form not only the basis of many traditional folklore studies, but which likewise ground many narratives on sense of place and place-making. The imaginary of regionalism – the narratives that we tell about community and difference – both strengthen community but have the ability to solidify divisions, even to promote xenophobia. In attempting to explain the story of Fort McMurray and the role of Newfoundlanders in northern Alberta, I embrace a critical regionalist model – a theory and approach to understanding the negotiation of *local* and *larger than local* using ethnographic data in combination with critical theory. My primary goal here is to demonstrate the interdependent nature of folklore and globalization, to dismantle popular and academic assumptions that dichotomize tradition/modernity, local/global, production/reproduction and even subjective/objective. My secondary goal, through this case study, is to shed light on everyday life in a city that is incessantly given a negative portrayal in the national and international media. Rather than present another critique of the ecological destruction of the oil/tar sands industry and the social disruption that is thought to define Fort McMurray, I attempt to reveal the linkages between environmental and social narratives. The attempts to limit discourse critiquing the oil/tar sands developments parallels our imagined limits on identity, difference, and region.

Using interviews with local community leaders (including politicians, directors for government and non-profit agencies dealing with work placement, immigrant settlement, family violence, child care, and housing),

along with interviews and observations with Newfoundlanders living in Fort McMurray (recent short-term and long-term residents), and with non-Canadian immigrants to northern Alberta (temporary foreign workers from the Philippines and El Salvador), I attempt to understand and explain everyday life in this conflicted city. My ethnographic work is limited to three short fieldwork trips (lasting approximately three weeks each in February 2007 and in February and October 2010)¹. This is not ideal. The residents of Fort McMurray deserve more in-depth ethnographic work in order to help tell their stories and to best address their social and cultural needs. I have attempted, however, to portray the overarching attitudes that I observed through these individuals and experiences so as to move beyond the polarized portrayals of life in Fort McMurray and the surrounding oil/tar sands industry – to add context and analysis to the oversimplified narratives that currently dominate discussions of this region.

While this is not a study of migration alone, concepts of regionalism, nationalism, and identity are complexed by movement – both interprovincial, rural-urban, and international forms of migration. The impact of migration is particularly profound when it consists of a variety of communities moving simultaneously through a variety of patterns – for instance, short-term, extended, cyclical, and permanent migration, and the division of each of these types into planned and experienced categories, i.e., those who intend a short-term or cyclical pattern, yet in experience become permanently resettled. In attempting to understand the changing face of northern Alberta, much of which is dominated by Newfoundland immigrants and temporary foreign workers, it is essential to consider a variety of migration patterns in both length of stay and work-related mobility, as well as in relation to surrounding communities and regions. We are faced with the question, for instance, of not only how northern Alberta has changed through the development of a dominant Newfoundland community, but likewise how the Newfoundland community is similar to or different from local Filipino, Salvadorian, Venezuelan, Ethiopian, Somali, and Lebanese immigrant communities.²

1. Fieldwork for this project was supported by the J. R. Smallwood Foundation for Newfoundland and Labrador Studies and by the Harris Centre for Applied Research Fund at Memorial University. Many thanks to Dr. Roger Epp (University of Alberta), Dr. Harry Hiller (University of Calgary), and Dr. Mary Hufford (Goucher College / Virginia Tech), as well as my anonymous reviewers, for feedback on earlier versions of this paper.
2. While this comparison may appear lopsided (international immigrants versus interprovincial migrants), Newfoundlanders in mainland Canada are often seen and treated more as immigrants to Canada than as Canadians moving between

While the terms region, cultural imaginary, cultural mythology, community, and identity can each be used to describe the following narratives, I embrace the term *regionalism* to emphasize the linking between physical space and the attachment of meaning to space (sense of place) in the construction of cultural imaginaries or identities. My definition of “sense of place” comes from a combination of folklore and cultural geography, where space is seen as static and physical and place is dynamic and cultural, and is produced through everyday narratives.³ One goal in this work, coming out of a critical regionalism perspective, is to better understand not only how we use narrative to establish sense of place, but how we identify within everyday life multiple layers of interacting and sometimes conflicting identities of physical space. This is about understanding region as a performance or process, and moving beyond the treatment of space or region as static, unchanging, and thus endangered through globalization. As such, I also demonstrate how the use of region in folkloristics has shifted substantially, to move beyond the romantic-nationalist roots of the discipline to an understanding of regionalism as a dynamic cultural performance constructed through everyday life in a globalized world, i.e., folklore. This emphasis on folklore and vernacular performance of region is in opposition to the static top-down models of region and identity that are increasingly the focus of government policy, international marketing, and of corporate control.

While folklorists have frequently used the category *region* in organizing collections of traditional culture, we tended to avoid adequately theorizing its construction until recently. As a result, collections of Newfoundland folklore, for instance, tended to identify unique traditions that existed on the island (especially that of English and Irish origins), while at times ignoring those traditions that did not fit tidily into the dominant identity categories and while ignoring the ongoing interconnected aspects of these traditions with the greater world. While history demonstrated otherwise, we categorized ourselves as isolated and defended it with regional folklore.⁴

provinces. This is partly due to the identity of Newfoundland as a distinct folklore region, because of its relatively recent confederation with Canada (1949), and because of a variety of ongoing economic and political tensions between Newfoundland and the Canadian federal government, especially in reference to the management of resources such as fish and oil.

3. See Jackson 1994, Ryden 1993 and Yi-fu Tuan 1977.
4. Philip Hiscock opened my eyes several years ago to this issue of isolation in Newfoundland. Ever since, I've been asking my undergraduate students each semester about Newfoundland isolation. Most students tell me that they've always been told that they were isolated, and that is why they are different. We then

My definition of *region* follows the dominant use in folklore – a geographic area marked by distinct traditions. This is often linked to ecological regions, with much of vernacular culture arising from relation to space and environment. For the purposes of my primary argument here, I use region from a vernacular perspective, where its current use often loosely conforms with political boundaries (such as Canadian provinces). Unlike political or economic definitions, however, this is a study of how people think about the spaces they live in; it is more about what the broader public thinks and experiences as a distinct area and less about concrete boundaries. It is what people *imagine* to be a distinct space.⁵

Following the work of Cheryl Herr (1996), Mary Hufford (2002, 2003), and Herbert Reid and Betsy Taylor (2002, 2010), I aim to demonstrate the value of a more critical, nuanced approach to region. Using tools from folkloristics, ethnography, and globalization theory, we need to deconstruct the essentialized and romantic identities that are inadvertently encouraged by earlier approaches to region. We can identify the ways in which regions are constructed and controlled in order to reveal shared patterns across disparate regions (thus revealing broader connections in the larger than local), as well as better understand how these constructions can both bring people together (community) and divide them (xenophobia).

My choice of the categories *romantic*, *displaced*, and *cosmopolitan* is an attempt to organize the types of narratives that I have observed in Fort McMurray within a framework of regionalisms as inspired by critical regionalism and, in particular, the work of Alexander Tzonis and Liane Lefaivre (1991), architectural theorists who initiated critical regionalism as an approach to the built environment, a reaction to modernist architecture and an attempt to blend vernacular and globalized design. Critical regionalism, as coined by Tzonis, Lefaivre, and Kenneth Frampton, is a way in which to “turn buildings into objects with which to think” (Tzonis 1991, 3-4). In terms of humanities research, and as adopted by folklorists Hufford, Herr, Reid and Taylor, critical regionalism is an attempt to better theorize the links between local and global, traditional and contemporary,

debate the issue of who was more connected globally in a sea-faring world, those on islands in the Atlantic Ocean who traded regularly with Europe, the United States, and the Caribbean, or those who were landbound in central Canada?

5. I base my definition here more on sentiment, or resonance in everyday life (inspired by Wikan 2012), along with the history of folklore regions. For greater discussion of the political and economic basis of Newfoundland regionalism, see Hiller 1987 and Hiller 2002. For discussion of sentiment and sense of place see Heinz 2010 and Tuan 1977.

conservative and progressive. It serves both as a critique for the limits of traditional regionalism, as well as a way to address questions and links between environmental and community sustainability as we attempt to protect tradition and sense of place yet embrace and accept inevitable change. Critical regionalism is a way to reground our popular use of regions from top-down corporate models (the loss of the local in social and political discourse) – to take it back, returning to bottom-up, community-based, everyday lived experience. As a city caught in conflict, in both environmental politics and community sustainability, Fort McMurray is an excellent site for a critical regionalist analysis.

Narrative #1: Romantic Alberta Regionalism



Figure 1. View from Syncrude Wood Buffalo Range.
photo by Cory W. Thorne, February 2010

In 1996, a herd of wood bison was introduced to the reclaimed grassland you see before you (this area was once part of Syncrude's mine!) While research so far has focused on exploring the viability of flat land grazing, this area will help scientists determine the effects of bison traffic on a rolling, more contoured reclaimed landscape. Results so far show promise. Continued success could lead to the development of habitats supporting over 1,000 wood bison. In turn, this would provide economic opportunities, such as ranching, for the Aboriginal people of Fort McKay. It could also help replenish the diseased herd in Wood Buffalo National Park.

Storyboard posted at the Syncrude Wood Buffalo Range

Approximately thirty kilometres north of Fort McMurray, there is a small buffalo range – part of a reclamation program sponsored by Syncrude, in partnership with the Fort McKay First Nation community.⁶ This buffalo range is built on land reclaimed from one of the oil sands developments. This site is surrounded by tailings ponds, Syncrude smokestacks, Suncor smokestacks, clear-cut land, two separate work camps, heavy equipment reshaping the land, and outdated machinery on display on the side of a four-lane divided highway. The range itself consists of a fenced-in area for the buffalo, various storyboards proclaiming Syncrude's dedication to the environment, and a monument of flags and plaques celebrating Syncrude's role in protecting and helping increase the size of the buffalo herds in northern Alberta. The site is surreal, yet it embodies romantic regionalism, globalization, and the need to mythologize the links between tradition and progress. The above image and narrative, taken from the Syncrude Wood Buffalo Range, represents the emerging struggle over romantic Alberta regionalism, as it arouses visions of the grasslands, nature, and the freedom of Alberta's frontier. Fur trapping, farming, and the Hudson's Bay trading posts, however, have been replaced by tailings ponds, smokestacks, and oil companies.

Drive another twenty-five kilometres north of this site, through further oil fields, across several tailings ponds, and past several additional work camps, and enter the town of Fort McKay, a wooded area of approximately 250 people.⁷ As with many northern First Nations communities in Canada, it is a place of contrasts. The town which Syncrude describes as a partner in the reclamation of the natural environment has been subject to debate on potential health problems (physiological and social) which, according to several studies, are at least in part associated with residence adjacent to oil sands developments (Moon 1988; Bianchi 2009). The residents of Fort McKay exhibit a strong sense of place, strong attachment to community – to the environment, yet they face numerous social, economic, and health problems. In recognizing the need to adapt to a changing environment, they have entered into partnerships with the oil companies so as to gain financial benefits in lieu of now inaccessible traditional lifestyles (Adkin

6. Beginning construction in 1973, and officially opening in 1978, Syncrude stands as one of the initial and largest oil companies/consortiums operating in northern Alberta. For community histories demonstrating the role of Syncrude in Fort McMurray, see Irwin Huberman 2001 and Timothy Le Riche 2006.

7. In 2006, Industry Canada indicated a band population of 467 and a total population of 520 when including people living within 40km of the community. A welcome sign near the turnoff from Highway 64 lists it below 250 (in 2010).

2009: 309-310). They are surrounded, however, by an international mobile work force – an aspect of globalization with a weak sense of place, and thus a weakened sense of responsibility. Fort McKay is, thus, caught in the middle of a changing romantic Alberta regionalism.

According to Alexander Tzonis, romantic regionalism requires historical knowledge in order to serve its political agenda (Tzonis 1991: 7-8). It uses architecture as a “memory machine,” instilling certain types of memories into the collective memories of living communities, thus entrenching a certain mythology of community identity. Such mythology, of course, is guided by what is marked versus what is unmarked, i.e., cultural hegemony negotiated and defined by organic intellectuals or people in positions of power (Gramsci 1999 [c1929]). The dominant story of Albertan identity is defined by those in power, framed through community and cultural industries, and used to maintain control over a changing world. According to Roger Epp (2006; 2001) this is the identity of rural simplicity and conservative farm life. Alberta is no longer isolated farm houses and unlimited freedoms, yet the attempt to maintain this narrative helps limit criticism over the changing landscape. Of course, Fort McMurray never was farming country, yet to claim Fort McMurray as part of the dominant Albertan region, an image of farming and ranching is essential, as evidenced in Syncrude’s storyboard.

Nineteenth century folklore studies assisted in the development of romantic regionalisms, through identification of regional architecture, narratives, and traditions while embracing Johann Gottfried von Herder’s linking of folklore and romantic nationalism (Bronner 1986). From this perspective, regional was conservative, limited, bounded – it set up essentialized identities and defined communities as isolated and unchanging, but strong and natural. While folklore studies have largely moved on to more complex understandings of community and culture as process, popular conceptions of the discipline frequently embrace these earlier romantic leanings that treated space as static and region as object.

Many contemporary narratives on identity continue to build from histories of romantic nationalism and romantic regionalism. Romantic Alberta regionalism is conservative – an attempt to hold onto and maintain conservative values based in the cultural imagination of the dominant population. It is an attempt to create/recreate solid boundaries, to simplify culture into unique bounded packages, and to protect from outside influence and the fears associated with immigration. As Roger Epp (2006) demonstrates, the cultural imaginary of Alberta – the mythology

of romantic regionalism – is based in the contrast between rural and urban spaces. It is about the negotiation of identity between the cities and growth centres (Calgary, Edmonton, Fort McMurray, Grand Prairie) and the rest. Epp argues that the rural imaginary is the dominant story of Alberta regionalism, yet it is one that romanticizes and threatens the rural spaces simultaneously:

So Albertans bought more pickup trucks per capita than other Canadians and parked many of them in suburban cul-de-sacs and downtown parking lots....they proclaimed an affinity for wide-open spaces but lived in sprawling suburban developments carved out of farm and ranch land. The maverick mythology persisted, but also obscured and disconnected (Epp 2006: 730).

This mythology of rural Alberta bumps against the reality that rural Alberta is increasingly a space of extraction and industrial production – not of community. It is a space where the history of the community is deeply embedded, yet one in which sense of place is increasingly mythologized rather than lived. Epp continues on to explain that public interest dictates rural extractive and industrial development, yet that there has always been ambivalence in the relationship between rural people and the energy industry. Just as First Nations people have come to abandon traditional ways of life, many farmers and ranchers have abandoned their struggles to protect their own land. They are now dependent on oil and gas development for off-farm work, lease revenues and municipal taxes. Because of oil money, they now have access to services that were otherwise unavailable. These farmers, the essence of romantic Alberta regionalism, have adopted new progressive realities of the globalized economy. In exchange, “They were sometimes left with contaminated soil, fractured water tables and diminished property values. Some of them resented that oil money had weakened an older spirit of neighbourliness in their communities” (Epp 2006: 735).

Turning to Raymond Williams’ *The Country and the City*, Epp notes the role of literature and cultural intellectuals in the construction of rural and urban spaces as polar opposites. Our imagining of these places – spaces with distinct geographic and cultural boundaries – is hardly new. The English city has long been constructed as space for the future, intellectual achievement, civilization, moral decay, noise and crime. The countryside has, in contrast, been mythologized as traditional, natural, innocent, quiet, ignorant, and backward. As Epp suggests, “These powerful images could not be dismissed simply as illusions, even if they did not necessarily reflect the complex reality of people’s lives in either setting” (741). These images, in spite of

our knowledge to the contrary, continue to form romantic regionalisms in contemporary society.

To contextualize romantic Alberta regionalism we must note how these ideas extend into the larger than local – as exemplified by the term “Canada’s Texas” and by the ongoing semantic debate over the terms *oil sand* and *tar sand*. Romantic Alberta regionalism is widely recognized across Canada. It is predominantly known as conservative, Christian, and white. It is the oil capital of Canada (though now closely followed by Newfoundland), home of the infamous oil/tar sands, the centre of big business, birthplace of Canada’s conservative party, stronghold of libertarianism, and one of the most important draws for both interprovincial and international migration in Canada.⁸ The term “Canada’s Texas” appears to be used by both conservatives (as a marker of pride) and liberals (as a pejorative).⁹ It is a powerful metaphor, for highlighting not only the strength of American popular culture in Canada (would an American audience ever conceive of themselves as mirroring a Canadian province? America’s Alberta?), but also for reducing diverse histories and identities into a succinct image.

The *tar-sands* versus *oil-sands* debate demonstrates the power of cultural mythologies and the subsequent need for control over imagined identities. This references an attempt on one side to emphasize the ecological destruction and opposition among environmentalists (using the term *tar-sands*), and on the other, to shape the dialogue toward economics and oil security (*oil-sands*). *Tar sands* was the common lexicon until the

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8. According to Statistics Canada (2012), the Regional Municipality of Wood Buffalo (RMWB - which contains both the city of Fort McMurray and the bulk of the oil sands developments) increased from 100,805 to 115,372 residents between 2006 and 2011 (14.5%). Those whose mother tongue was not one of Canada’s official languages (English or French) increased from 2995 to 19,000. Part of that increase can be attributed to increased use and reporting of Aboriginal languages. However, 12,810 spoke neither English, French, nor a Canadian aboriginal language. The remainder are assumed to be a combination of new immigrants to Canada and interprovincial migrants from other provinces (from non-Canadian backgrounds). This trend is likewise suggested by the diversity of languages reported in RMWB (309 identified in 2011, up from 183 in 2006). This migration is attributed to the oil-sands developments, and the spin-off service economies.
 9. Primarily a vernacular reference, it has found its way into the media. There is a Facebook page titled “Canada’s Texas,” with the description: “Dedicated to Albertan rednecks, the Texas of Canada. The North will rise again!” (Canada’s Texas 2012). One conservative news magazine, *National Review*, celebrates both this metaphor and the similarities of late premier Ralph Klein to Ronald Reagan (Fund 2013).

1970s and until the industry began to expand and to market itself while facing a growing opposition (Nikiforuk 2013). According to the Alberta provincial government, *oil sands* is now the only acceptable term as the raw material has little in common with tar and is eventually processed into oil (Alberta Energy 2014). Opposition groups tend to use the term *tar sands* exclusively (for example, see Greenpeace Canada 2014), noting that without extensive processing, it looks, smells, and feels like tar, and was once used for waterproofing the same way as we use tar (Nikiforuk 2013). Various opposition members, and even Barrack Obama, have been attacked in the Canadian media and in parliament for using the word *tar*, with the suggestion that by using this word they are somehow linking themselves with environmental activists, even *radicals* (Dembicki 2011).

The tar versus oil debate, alongside the metaphor Canada's Texas, explicitly demonstrates what Herbert Reid and Betsy Taylor describe as a form of enclosure and control over the commons, where we are forced into rigid dualisms such as human/nature, control/controlled and subject/object in the attempt to make one eco-class appear to be more valuable than another, thus justifying inequality (2010: 26). In essence, it is a debate which attempts to erase alternatives to oil sands developments – not just to stifle environmental critique, but to mask any possibility of conceiving of alternate approaches to the current ecological/economic imbalance. The provincial government of Alberta, as shown by its opposition to the term tar-sand, is in fact attempting to stifle debate in favour of the oil industry, contributing to enclosure and, on a broader scale, disrupting democracy in favour of corporate control. The irony here, however, is that many of those who have been critiqued for using the term tar-sand were/are most likely naive to Albertan sensitivities and the government's attempt to control discourse.

Did Barrak Obama intend to side with Greenpeace and initiate a battle of words when, while responding to an audience question during a town-hall meeting in Pennsylvania, he said: "These tar sands...there are some environmental questions about how destructive they are, potentially, what are the dangers there, and we've got to examine all those questions" (Dembicki 2011)? Personally, I see in this response an empty statement, a political statement that is carefully worded to avoid demonstrating strong support in either direction. Regardless of one's position on these developments, I would certainly hope that we could all agree that questions should be asked. Of course, Reid and Taylor's argument on enclosure and eco-class suggest that the goal is exactly opposite: questions should not be asked. Obama was attempting to dodge a dangerous question, and by

accidentally using the word *tar* he violated the debate.

It appears that many Canadians outside of Alberta agree that it is time for media, governments, oil companies and environmentalists to start focusing on actual issues of environmental sustainability, economics, and oil security, instead of proroguing with an empty debate based in weak semantics (Cosh 2012). While the semiotic debate has proved a handy distraction to real debate (avoiding asking or answering any real questions), it has revealed the intense division regarding control over this space, which is frequently reduced to an assumption of political ideology (Obama said tar sand? He is such a left-wing radical!). The *oil* versus *tar* debate is at its core a debate over ideologies – a question of what Alberta is or should stand for. In the reduction into right/left, economic/environmental, good/bad, the necessary natural balance of production and reproduction is buried, thus guaranteeing increased control by the primary stakeholders.

So what is the mythology behind romantic Alberta regionalism? It is an attachment to rural life as based in history and imagination. It suggests a strong sense of place, wholesome communities, and solid work ethics. It is an image of whiteness, often in attempt to erase or falsify histories of First Nations communities, non-European immigrants, and non-Christian immigrants. It is an image of struggle with and against nature by hard working individuals. It is a story of freedom earned and to be protected. Romantic Alberta regionalism is about stable, industrious communities. It is a mythology that is encouraged by the provincial government and the international oil industry, but one which is filled with irony as it attempts to balance tradition with modernity.

It is hard to take Syncrude's storyboard seriously. The reframing of oil/tar sand extraction and reclamation as environmentally progressive is a dangerous mythology that, by grossly oversimplifying, attempts to stifle debate on both the environmental and social impact of these developments. As demonstrated by anthropologist Clinton Westman (2013), social impact statements written by oil companies are often based on little or no scientific data, and/or using knowingly flawed studies. These statements are then accepted by government authorities as fact, and thus used to build consensus from a top-down perspective, resulting in stories such as that presented here: Syncrude is not only environmentally and socially sustainable, but its oil mining and processing operations actually *improve* the ecosystem and the lives of First Nations communities such as Fort McKay – a neo-colonial statement that melds romantic Alberta regionalism with the needs of the international oil industry.

Narrative #2: Displaced Newfoundland Regionalism



Figure 2. McMurray Newfoundlanders' Club. Photo by Cory W. Thorne February, 2010.

Been living in McMurray now since 1985,
and all I've got to show for it is thank God that I'm alive.
I've worked real hard since I got here but I just can't save a cent,
by the time I cash my cheque it seems the bread's already spent.

*Yeah I've got to find a woman with a Syncrude job,
she's got to own the house she's in and drive a fancy car.
A pretty hefty bank account with lots of credit cards,
and goes to church on Sundays and stays away from bars.*

I hope she's working night shifts straight with lots of overtime,
That way I can stay out late and party with the boys.
I'll let her buy me lots of gifts my love is up for grabs,
But the only girls who qualify must all have Syncrude jobs.

"Looking for a Woman with a Syncrude Job" by East Coast Connection

The dominant aspect of Newfoundland regionalism is in migration. Ever since there has been a place called Newfoundland, there has been a displaced Newfoundland regionalism. Building from previous research with Newfoundlanders in southern Ontario and across various parts of the United States, I have often argued that to understand Newfoundland identity, one must acknowledge this history of migration (Thorne 2004; 2007).¹⁰ To be a Newfoundlander is to know someone who has left Newfoundland, either

10. For earlier statistics, on Newfoundlanders in Boston, see Reeves 1990.

for long-term or seasonal/cyclical migration through work, or through more continuously mobile forms of work, i.e., workers who travel without settling elsewhere, such as many fishermen and sealers, as well as flight crews, traveling salesmen, and, most recently, those who work in Alberta's oil sands while retaining primary residence in Atlantic Canada.

As a space for Newfoundlanders to eat, drink, and socialize any time of day, the McMurray Newfoundlander's Club is part of a displaced Newfoundland narrative. It marks a historical period when, in the 1970s, many Newfoundland expatriates felt the need to form their own social space – not only to keep in touch with friends from home, but likewise to feel accepted within a community that at times was resistant to their existence. The model of the club is reflective of similar Newfoundland clubs in southern Ontario and, as examined by W. G. Reeves (1990) and Millie Rahn (1997), clubs that have existed in Boston since at least the late 1800s. These clubs provided not only social space, sometimes within a xenophobic environment, but likewise provided support services for families facing hardship, including responding to crisis in Newfoundland itself. There are parallels here between Newfoundlanders in Boston sending supplies to Newfoundland in the 1890s (in response to the 1892 fire that destroyed much of the city of St. John's), and the relief fundraising held at the McMurray-Newfoundlander's club to help victims of Hurricane Igor in 2010.¹¹

The Newfoundland-McMurray music scene, built in combination with the McMurray Newfoundlander's Club and other local Newfoundland public and private spaces, likewise expands on this narrative by maintaining and developing migration stories within the Newfoundland cultural imaginary. The song "Looking for a Woman with a Syncrude Job" not only demonstrates some of the real life challenges of migration between Newfoundland and northern Alberta, but it likewise helps establish the dominant narrative within this type of regionalism (part of which addresses changing gender roles, while maintaining an anti-feminist perspective). While many new residents to Fort McMurray struggle to make ends meet, many others thrive within this new setting. Many young men move here single, but others come with families and/or use money from Fort McMurray to support families back home in Newfoundland. Some remain trapped in

11. See Millie Rahn 1997 and her discussion of the "Boston Barrell"; Hurricane Igor, a category 1 storm, caused extensive damage across the eastern and southern parts of the island, mainly because the island had not been hit by many hurricanes until recently. With the warming waters, however, hurricane warnings and tropical storms are becoming stronger and more frequent.

a cycle of poverty, in part related to problems with stress, debt, alcohol, and gambling, while others successfully invest in the future. The imaginary of displaced Newfoundland regionalism, however, creates social pressure to embrace a Newfoundland patriotism and to avoid acculturation into the globalized reality of Fort McMurray. Some of my informants suggested that it is best not to tell others that you are happy living here; there is a continuous pressure to state publicly that you wish you were home in dear old Newfoundland.

Newfoundland specifically, and Atlantic Canada more broadly, is an imagined folklore region, constructed through a variety of discourses within official and unofficial structures (for example, how identity is taught through the educational system versus how it is told in personal narratives and in song). The cultural imaginary that forms this regionalism, however, is one that works to erase various conflicting forms of identity. As with Alberta, it creates an image of sameness and solidarity. According to Christopher Armstrong:

We should be careful about social position, especially what regionalism is often said to exclude: identities of class, gender, and race, as well as the unequal distribution of education across these and other social groups. For while all who imagine themselves members of this community have a role to play in its construction, a distinct group called “cultural intellectuals” have considerable power in controlling access to the means of representation (2004, 246).

In demonstrating the overlap between official and unofficial attempts to control regionalisms, Armstrong presents 1) the migration experience as a vehicle of social critique – an act of binding in identifying cultural boundaries; and 2) the role of evoking nostalgia – “a lament for severed bonds of family and place that constitute a characteristically modern anti-modernism” (248). While he examines these two uses of migration narratives from the perspective of literature /cultural intellectuals, they likewise are reflected in various forms of vernacular culture, or folklore. Folklore functions outside of the official structures and thus provides a more accurate, unmediated representation of regionalism – the critical *lived* regionalism to the uncritical cultural imaginary of politics and mass culture.

As observed by Peter Narváez (1997), Newfoundlanders have a long history of using song as a tool for vernacular discourse regarding politics and social change. Access to private basement recording studios, independent distribution (most recently aided by YouTube and similar Internet websites), and the absence of any form of middlemen/managers, enables local

musicians to create, perform, and distribute their ideas directly. The voices and experiences of many Newfoundlanders are self-recorded and promoted, thus distributing messages and promoting discussions on ideas that might otherwise remain hidden, or perhaps more dangerously, mediated. It is through these songs that Newfoundlanders teach themselves who they are supposed to be, and likewise debate who they really are within the broader Canadian cultural imaginary. Folklore, including vernacular song, is one remedy to the imbalance previously noted by Reid and Taylor.

Many critical regionalist studies draw primarily on literature in attempt to reveal the imaginary that underlies a given region (Herr 1996, Powell 2007, Limón 2008). However, we cannot forget that there are a variety of types of cultural intellectuals, many of whom are more local, intimate, and hidden. There is a wealth of literature which embodies displaced Newfoundland regionalism, but contemporary popular song is more immediate and intimate in constructing the Alberta stage of this movement. The cultural intellectuals behind contemporary migration songs, however, likewise tend to be limited in terms of gender, class, and education. Newfoundlanders who willingly acculturate to mainland Canada are, not surprisingly, absent from this genre. University-educated Newfoundlanders who are part of the diaspora tend to be absent from this discourse (partly through their greater likelihood of acculturation). More concerning, however, is the lack of access to women's voices, as the music scene is dominated by men (perhaps it is time for a women's response to East Coast Connection's song?). Regardless, this is the dominant narrative serving the cultural imaginary that I've labeled "displaced Newfoundland regionalism."

When I began this project, my intention was to look into Newfoundland public spaces within Fort McMurray, to identify how folklore was used and altered in the attempt to build a sense of place for the local community. My initial observation/conclusion was that because of the high real estate costs and limited social spaces, there were fewer identifiable Newfoundland spaces than I expected for a city with such a large Newfoundland population. On further observation and interviewing, however, I saw that there was a lesser need to construct independent Newfoundland spaces than I observed in other Newfoundland migrant communities. It is difficult to gather accurate statistics on the number of Newfoundlanders living in Alberta (not to mention the problem of defining *Newfoundlander*). However, the popular claim among Newfoundland-Albertans is that at least fifty percent of the

city is Newfoundland-born.¹² Some scholars contest that the numbers are exaggerated through media sensationalism, and yet by walking down the street of Fort McMurray, you will see, smell, and hear Newfoundland. There is a wealth of Newfoundland imagery on homes, trucks, store fronts, and clothing, and there are Newfoundland restaurants and bars as well as grocery stores well stocked with Newfoundland foods (including fish trucks selling Newfoundland seafood), and Newfoundland music.

Through the extended history of Newfoundland out-migration, Newfoundland communities have existed along the north-eastern corridor of the United States (Boston, New York, Philadelphia). Starting in the 1940s, with the establishment of several American military bases in Newfoundland, this shifted to Newfoundland women marrying American soldiers, and subsequently moving to live adjacent to major bases in the United States, particularly in Virginia Beach/Norfolk, Virginia and in San Diego, California. Since Newfoundland confederation with Canada (1949), the bulk of migration has been to southern Ontario, particularly Toronto and Cambridge.¹³ While Newfoundlanders formed communities in each of these spaces, often establishing neighbourhoods defined by bars, restaurants, and/or social clubs, Newfoundlanders in Fort McMurray today dominate many public spaces. The need for Newfoundland space appears diminished/diminishing as in many ways all of Fort McMurray is a Newfoundland space, with Albertans and non-Newfoundland immigrants forming a cultural minority. As suggested in vernacular discourse, Fort McMurray is “Newfoundland’s third largest city.”

For every Newfoundlander, wherever they may be, there is a story of migration or displacement – either from lived experience or through that of a close family member or friend. Newfoundland regionalism, as we see within contemporary popular Newfoundland song, includes Fort McMurray as much as it does any traditional outport in Newfoundland itself. Contemporary Newfoundland migration songs frame the narrative of displaced Newfoundland regionalism, replacing the need for physical cultural spaces for many Newfoundlanders in Alberta. Newfoundland country music, and more specifically the sub-genre “Newfoundland

12. Harry Hiller provides statistics here, in his study of Alberta migration, which includes extensive reference to both Newfoundland and Atlantic Canadian migrants (2009).

13. Many Newfoundlanders continue to refer to the Newfoundland-Galt community. Galt is now part of Cambridge, a city that was formed in 1973 with the amalgamation of the towns Galt, Hespeler, and Preston. Galt/Cambridge is 100km west of Toronto.

migration song,” is distributed through traditional means such as kitchen parties in private homes and performances in Newfoundland clubs and festivals across Canada, as well as through the Internet.

Within the context of Fort McMurray, distribution of these songs is based in part in local Newfoundland spaces such as the McMurray Newfoundlander’s Club, through local Newfoundland restaurants such as Kosy Korner Family Restaurant and, more recently, Mrs. B’s Family Restaurant, and through “kitchen parties” (house parties). It is likewise promoted and distributed through Bill Bartlett’s “The Banks of Newfoundland Radio Show,” broadcast out of Fort McMurray on Country 93.3 since the mid-1990s. Bartlett, who commutes regularly between his primary residence in Edmonton and work in Fort McMurray, created and maintains the show to help bring a piece of home to Newfoundlanders up north. He selects the songs based on popular requests, quality of the music, and its fit within the Newfoundland genre (Bartlett 2010). He has likewise produced CD collections of these songs, now in fifteen volumes, which he sells in the local Newfoundland businesses.

Newfoundland bands, based in both Newfoundland and in other parts of Canada (particularly Alberta and Ontario), frequently write and perform songs that not only reflect on traditional Newfoundland culture, part of a romantic Newfoundland regionalism, but they likewise help create this displaced Newfoundland regionalism (they form one type of cultural intellectual). Among the earliest, in reference to Newfoundland-Alberta migration, is Simani’s 1981 hit “Saltwater Cowboys.” It makes the argument that no matter where Newfoundlanders end up living, they will always remain Newfoundlanders. In the words of Simani, “You’re still just a Newfie in a Calgary hat.” As one of the top songs by one of the best known contemporary Newfoundland bands, “Saltwater Cowboys” still receives airplay on local radio stations, and continues to feature on various Newfoundland radio shows.¹⁴ Musical responses to the song include Brian Burton’s “The Saltwater Cowboy Comes Home,” which describes a Newfoundlander moving home to Newfoundland from Alberta, broke, and going to work in Newfoundland’s emerging oil industry. The Bay Boys continue this theme with the song “The Saltwater Cowboy Returns,” placing themselves as the subject of Simani’s hit: “I’m the Saltwater Cowboy Simani sings about, I went to Alberta but it didn’t work out. I guess I got homesick, we’ll leave it at that. But I’ve still got me boots and

14. For discussion on the impact of Simani on contemporary Newfoundland song, see Pocius 1988.

big Calgary hat.”

The majority of contemporary Newfoundland songs within this vein fit within the Newfoundland country genre, which was heavily shaped by Simani’s style – a guitar/accordion duo with electric drum machine. Additional songs in this style, referencing displaced Newfoundland regionalism, include:¹⁵

“Tar Sand Fever” by East Coast Connection, which describes the singer’s move to Alberta in 1976, his work in the oil sands/tar sands, as well as the heavy equipment (tools of his trade)

“Newfoundland Sky” by Bernie Sheaves, which describes the heartache the singer faces when he leaves his love in Newfoundland for work in Alberta

“Moving Away” by the Cormiers, the story of a school girl watching her friends and their families packing up and moving away from Newfoundland, references the economic problems of outport Newfoundland

“Everybody Back Home Misses You” by Roy Payne, is performed as a letter written to all Newfoundlanders living away, from Cape Breton to Alberta, describing life at home among those left behind

“Fort McMurray” by Joe West, is the story of a Newfoundlander who leaves home in search of work, yet encounters similar problems in Fort McMurray

“Fort McMurray, My Home Tonight” by Ches Ruth, describes life in Fort McMurray, enjoying the financial benefits but working so hard that you rarely see friends or family

“Bury Our Bodies in Newfoundland Soil” by Bob Porter, is a political song citing overfishing by foreign trawlers and lack of political intervention by Canadian politicians in the decline of Newfoundland’s fishery, thus forcing many Newfoundland fishermen to move to Fort McMurray, likewise cites the emerging oil industry in Newfoundland but the lack of financial benefits from this industry for those wanting to return home

“Catch a Plane to Fort McMurray” by Roy Payne, is a love story of a couple living between Newfoundland and Fort McMurray

“Looking for a Woman with a Syncrude Job” by East Coast Connection,

15. Thank you to Laura Sanchini for her assistance in identifying several of these songs.

is the story of a man struggling to make ends meet in Fort McMurray, and thus searching for a woman to help pay the bills.

This list is not comprehensive. This sampling, however, contributes to the construction of the Newfoundland cultural imaginary, and thus contributes to a displaced Newfoundland regionalism. Narratives of displacement are likewise reflected in local literature, joke cycles, comedies, and in personal experience narratives. They are a part of everyday discourse.

Displaced Newfoundland regionalism is likewise reflected in the phrase “Mexicans with Sweaters,” a reference to Newfoundland migrant workers that creates an imaginary link between internal legal migration patterns within Canada and a largely non-existent, but increasingly publicized “problem” with illegal migration in Alberta. The term appears to be first published in 2006, in a weekly newsletter in Newfoundland, *Current: A Newfoundland and Labrador Alternative*. In his article “Mexicans with Sweaters: Making the Journey West,” Greg Locke describes the lives of middle-aged Newfoundlanders in Fort McMurray, implicitly combating the stereotype that many Alberta oil workers are young, dangerous, drug abusers – whereas in reality most are middle-aged former fishermen who lost their livelihoods with the collapse of the North Atlantic Cod stocks in Newfoundland, and the subsequent cod moratorium (ongoing since 1992).¹⁶ While I never encountered the phrase “Mexicans with Sweaters” during my own fieldwork, I did hear reference to “Mexicans of the North” and I frequently heard the question with which Locke concludes and comments:

What would happen if all the Newfoundlanders in Fort McMurray laid down their tools? Locals estimate that 50% – 60% of the population is from Newfoundland. Would the flow of oil from the tar sands slow to a trickle? Hardly, they would just ship in more foreign workers to do the jobs. ...like they are talking about now on the dusty streets of Fort McMurray. Last month there was talk of bringing plane loads of Chinese workers to Alberta. Maybe Russians will be next. Africans drive the cabs. People from the Middle East run the fast food joints. I guess there are just not enough Newfoundlanders to go around. (Locke 2006)

“What would they do if all the Newfoundlanders laid down their tools?” was a trope during both my fieldwork in Fort McMurray, and in my previous work in Cambridge, Ontario, in a city where Newfoundlanders claimed to

16. Approximately 35,000 Newfoundlanders (out of approximately 500,000) found themselves unemployed at the start of the moratorium in 1992 (Overton 2000: 5-6). Refusing to abandon Newfoundland, many began cyclical migration to Fort McMurray in order to maintain their homes, families, and outport lifestyles as closely as possible.

represent upward of 20% of the population, mostly resettling after the closure of a large iron ore mine on Bell Island, Newfoundland (Thorne 2004). Locke, however, politicizes the narrative by turning to the better known, but little understood issue of Mexican-American immigration, a comparison that, unfortunately, encourages Newfoundlanders to demonstrate another layer of xenophobia (We've sunk to the level of Mexico?). The "Mexicans with Sweaters" was subsequently referenced in the House of Assembly in Newfoundland, as one politician attempted to make a significant yet problematic argument on the "problem" of Newfoundland out-migration:

Who are the Mexicans with Sweaters? Who are they? They are talking about Newfoundlanders going to Fort McMurray to find work and they are talking about their primitive skills, their primitive resource and trades-base skills. That is who they are talking about, Newfoundlanders; grey-haired Newfoundlanders with their primitive resource skills. What are they talking about? Who are they talking about? They are talking about fisherpeople... We are Mexicans, and if anyone has listened to the news coming out of the United States these days, the biggest problem they have in the Southern States now are Mexicans coming out of tunnels and crawling on their fences trying to get out of Mexico and into the United States. It is such a problem down there that George Bush is going to send the Militia down there to stop them from coming over the border because the Mexicans... They are going to build a wall because the Mexicans are so poor that they are digging holes under fences in the United States to get into that country because they think there is a better way of life. Now we are going to be considered Mexicans in sweaters going to Alberta, in a country like Canada, in a Province like Newfoundland and Labrador where the Minister of Finance and the Premier are constantly patting themselves on the back for the Atlantic Accord and all the money they got and talking about investing in oil, investing in hydroelectric projects and not investing in an industry that has sustained us for 500 years, and looking at these people who keep that industry alive and have kept them alive through the tough times of the Depression and through everything else. What are we going to invest in those people? (NL House of Assembly 2006)

While the politicization of this term is intriguing, I am also concerned with one final aspect of names and stereotypes in this community. As evidenced during my work in both Alberta and in Ontario, and as a Newfoundlander who has travelled extensively across Canada and the United States, I frequently encounter the "positive" stereotype that is attached to Newfoundland "migrant" workers: fun-loving, hard-working, dependable companions. Whenever I present my research interests to new people (both Newfoundlanders and non-Newfoundlanders) I often get the

response: “I love Newfies. They are hard workers. They never complain. They are always happy and they like to party” (a description that makes me visualize a big, hairy, slobbering Newfoundland dog). In Fort McMurray, this was often presented with “Newfies are so much better to work with than... [insert favourite racial pejorative].” It is intended as a “positive” stereotype, attempting to hide its negative undertones from critique, but is not so different from the intrinsically racist “I’m not racist, *but...*” comment.¹⁷

Narratives of displacement are not unique to Newfoundland. They are particularly common among rural communities, threatened communities, and among island cultures. Contemporary Newfoundland identity, however, is rooted first and foremost in the story of displaced regionalism. Displaced Newfoundland regionalism both challenges and reaffirms romantic Alberta regionalism: 1) by situating Newfoundlanders as a temporary and reluctant distraction on the Alberta landscape; 2) by critiquing anti-Newfoundland discourses that are part of the xenophobia supported by romantic Alberta regionalism; 3) by promoting another form of cultural imaginary, that of the singular patriotic outport fisherman who is a victim of globalization and who must aim for the purity and sanctuary of home; and 4) by emphasizing the importance of maintaining a regionally dominant cultural imaginary, be it a Newfoundlander who should forever dream of outport life, or an Albertan whose suburban pickup truck serves as a symbol of desire for a lost agrarian lifestyle.

Narrative #3: Regional Municipality of Wood Buffalo (RMWB) Cosmopolitanism?

While visiting a store in Fort McMurray in February, 2010, I overheard a salesperson give advice to what appeared to be two Japanese tourists. The young woman gave a brief description and history of the town, provided directions to some local landmarks, and then told the tourists to take care with the local taxi drivers. “Don’t take a taxi outside of the town – I’ve heard bad stories about our taxis. They are ok within city limits, but I’d be nervous going too far with them.” I tell this tale hesitantly, as well as include the image of the Fort McMurray Islamic Centre, not to paint the city as

17. The term “Newfie” is another ongoing debate in Newfoundland studies and popular culture. Used both emicly and eticly, it is often presented with positive intentions, but likewise hits on difficult tensions between Newfoundland and much of the rest of Canada. Newfoundlanders make fun of themselves with this term. When Ontarians or Albertans attempt to label us as such, especially in the context of political debate, it can take on particularly negative connotations (see Davies 1997, for example).

one of violence and fear (a problem that is already overly sensationalized in the Canadian media) or to exoticize the space in relation to North American Islamophobia, but rather to introduce the idea that RMWB (which includes Fort McMurray) should be seen as a cosmopolitan space, filled with residents, workers, and visitors from throughout the world. It is not what we expect to see if we embrace the conservative imaginary of romantic Alberta regionalism, or even the limited landscape described under displaced Newfoundland regionalism. In terms of cultural-imaginary, it aspires to the status of city-state, something that operates beyond the



Figure 3. Fort McMurray Islamic Centre. Photo by Cory W. Thorne, February 2010.

capacity of Alberta, or even of Canada.

While I cannot say with certainty whether or not there are actual experiences of local taxi drivers robbing or assaulting passengers or tourists, I have not found any indications of such in any of the local media. I do question, however, if the fear of cabbies in Fort McMurray might be associated with the fact that many of the local taxi drivers are East African – often Ethiopian and Somali – one of the larger visible minorities in the city, many of whom wear traditional clothing which outsiders identify as Islamic. Rather than assume and dismiss this as a form of thinly veiled racism, we should consider it as a type of vernacular response to a changing community, i.e., a conflict of regionalisms for those dedicated to maintaining one of the more conservative aspects of a romantic regionalism. However we interpret this example, it is a story about emerging cosmopolitanism

and the fears and anxieties of shifting regionalisms. This no longer is and never was (despite our best attempts of imagination) a purely white, Christian, Anglo community. This loss of romantic Albertan regionalism is problematic to those dedicated to a conservative past, sometimes reflected in the promotion of traditional cultural imaginaries, sometimes reflected through xenophobic fear and conflict.

Such fears are hardly new or unexpected. As noted by David Sibley (1995, 90):

...spaces are tied together by media messages, by local rules about the appropriate uses of suburban gardens, by the state's immigration policies, and so on. Some of these connections may be illuminated by moving between the home, the locality and the nation rather than treating each spatial configuration as a discrete problem.

It is the movement between spaces that creates fear and, as such, influences geopolitical relationships. Migration causes a rupture of sense of place and thus creates the need to re-establish physical and social linkages through activities in everyday life – stories, experiences, interactions, and rituals. Very few residents here (other than local First Nations communities) can claim a strong sense of place in northern Alberta, though many southern Albertans lay claim as part of an Alberta regionalism, and many white Canadians lay claim under an imagined Canadian unified identity. When looking at a city where the majority of the population lacks a strong sense of place, i.e., they were born outside of this community, conflict over space and cultural imaginary is seemingly inevitable.

In studying the impact of recent migration to Alberta, Harry Hiller notes:

Migration is often viewed as exchanging one place for another, as though the physical place itself does not matter. Labour theories of migration, in particular, assume that places are merely objects or landscapes that can be exchanged for new places in the search for employment” (2009, 171).

As with any discussion of regionalism, the notion that place is merely physical is an error – it ignores the lived experiences in everyday life. As with immigrants throughout the world, immigrants to Fort McMurray attempt to recreate and negotiate a sense of place – balancing the needs and experiences as members of both the sending and host communities.¹⁸ As in

18. This is a common theme in ethnographic studies of migration, especially within postmodern ethnography. See for instance John D. Dorst 1999, Debra Lattanzi Shutika 2011, and Cory W. Thorne 2004.

the case of Newfoundland regionalism, Fort McMurray becomes intimately attached to Newfoundland regionalism, thus creating a conflict within romantic Alberta regionalism. Because of the scale of immigration from both other parts of Canada and from around the world to Fort McMurray, romantic Alberta regionalism must give way to a RMWB cosmopolitanism. No single group can claim this physical space as their own to the exclusion of others.

As Fort McMurray continues to develop as a host city for interprovincial and international migration, and as it continues to develop as a key centre for the multi-national oil industry, it must come to terms with the fact that this is a small city with a global function. This is a new place, which belongs as much to Newfoundland as it does to Alberta and to the international mobile work force and the global oil industry as it does to Alberta's hunters and farmers. Furthermore, no matter how we might attempt to deny it, it is a city caught in the centre of global environmental debate/crisis. Rather than mourning the loss of identity resultant from the oil sands, mourning the loss of sense of place related to a international mobile work force, or questioning the ways in which to increase pride in Alberta among interprovincial and international migrants, it is time for us to admit that Fort McMurray functions outside of each of these imaginaries. Community programs aiming to improve this space, or as local politicians often suggest "to make it more family friendly", must shift to acknowledge a local cosmopolitanism (instead of focusing on recreating suburban, Christian, nuclear family lifestyles).

Folklore/xenophobia: A Dichotomy?

On my first trip to Fort McMurray in 2007, I was fortunate to meet informally with Mayor Melissa Blake, to introduce my interests in studying Newfoundland community in RMWB and to discuss with her some of the issues facing the city. At the time, Fort McMurray had hit somewhat of a low in the Canadian media, which featured nearly daily reports of prostitution, drug use, gambling, homelessness, and violence in the city. One piece of "investigative reporting" described prostitutes from Edmonton and Calgary who would visit the city once or twice a month, earning in one weekend what they would typically make in a month down south. Other reporters were focused on the fears of violence and drug use surrounding the work camps – in particular a new work camp built near downtown Fort McMurray, to house construction workers for the new athletic centre on MacDonald Island.

These were stories about fear, which in many cases appeared to be exaggerated, even unsubstantiated. In subsequent discussions with oil sands workers, including various work camp residents, I was given a different story: Some camps are better run than others, but most are filled with middle-aged, hard-working, respectable men. Sure some use drugs, most don't. Most workers are subject to random drug tests. Many camps are dry (alcohol is forbidden) and experience very few cases of violence, especially considering the number of men (and some women) living in close capacity, working in dangerous and stressful jobs, and living away from their wives and their children for extended periods. At the end of the shift, most just wanted to get back to camp, have a hot meal, and sleep.

Long-time Mayor Blake, however, was facing an uphill battle. She discussed the challenges of the suburban design of much of the city – a division into several “family friendly” isolated suburbs and a more chaotic and dangerous downtown, a design which she acknowledged was a mistake in terms of earlier urban planning (and a design that continues to plague and be reproduced in most North American cities). She discussed the need to challenge the national image of Fort McMurray, to convince more people that this was indeed a comfortable and safe place to live, an excellent place to raise a family. She described the various support services available for new residents, and the proposed developments that would increase public social and recreational space.

While I agree that violence and social ills in Fort McMurray have been overly sensationalized by the media, I must also acknowledge how during my second visit to the city there was a double homicide in the apartment building adjacent to my hotel, and how early one evening a middle-aged native woman approached me to offer sexual services. This is reality – a reality that exists in many urban centres. Once again however, I offer these examples not to sensationalize the problems of the city, but rather to remind that this is a small city with big city problems, a place where people come hoping for economic opportunity, for a change in life. Not all are successful.

While I finish with a list of conclusions arising from critical discourse, I acknowledge that none of these are immediate or practical in terms of municipal politics, but rather they focus on the broader challenge of building public support for positive change – of giving a foundation for a more democratic process. Based on my limited fieldwork in RMWB, my understanding of regionalism and of folkloristics, I am confident in the following:

First, while the cultural imaginary Newfoundland region connotes folklore and culture linked to the island of Newfoundland (and more loosely to the mainland portion of the province, Labrador), folklorists can no longer define Newfoundland folklore as isolated nor situate folklore as antithetical to globalization. This should apply to our history as well as to contemporary society as the island was never isolated in the way that it is imagined. The extent and speed of contemporary migration and communication, however, reveal more explicitly the globalized nature of this and other regions.

Second, as with Newfoundland regionalism, Alberta is not and has never been isolated in the ways that are popularly imagined. Media, popular culture, and politics frequently embrace this misleading imagination. This is done for positive reasons – as a way of protecting the sense of place. Frequently, however, it results in negative outcomes – increased xenophobia.

Third, Fort McMurray, because of the scale of migration and because of the international debates regarding the oil industry and environmental crisis, is uniquely situated in debates over regionalism and identity. As such, politicians and community activists must embrace a more global vision for this city if they hope to create a more sustainable community.

Fourth, we need better education at all levels on historic and contemporary diversity in Canada. We need to better educate the public on this history of globalization so as to demonstrate the weakness of the dominant cultural imaginaries that leads to a false imagination of Canadian, Albertan, Newfoundland... identities. To pretend that we are something that we are not and never were is disingenuous and dangerous; it enables us to continue an us/them mentality and engage in xenophobia.

Fifth, the false dichotomies of human/nature, oil/environment, ecological/economic, subject/object, us/them must be abandoned by media, popular culture, environmentalists, politicians, and political activists. Otherwise, there is little hope for productive debate or progress in terms of community sustainability/xenophobia or environmental sustainability/a balancing of human/nature, production/reproduction.¹⁹ The environmental issues caused by oil/tar sands extraction and the social problems related to conflicting identities in Alberta and in Newfoundland are closely

19. This is a core component of Reid and Taylor's (2010) discussion of production and reproduction in ecological and civic commons, and their proposal for "a dynamic materialist definition of the commons as the *substantive grounds of social and ecological reproduction*. (22)"

interlinked through our approach to knowledge and debate. Unless we approach this more holistically, there is little hope of achieving a balanced or productive discussion.

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